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ABSTRACT

The task of defining the work of cultural critics is considerably simpler in composition studies than it is in the English department as a whole because of the narrower focus of composition studies' cultural criticism. The field of cultural studies has become so diverse that giving it a clear definition is nearly impossible, and, for some, because of the limiting effect of a definition, undesirable. Cultural studies of the compositionists can be referred to as "cultural criticism" to differentiate it from the "cultural studies" of literature specialists. Cultural criticism can be defined as a pedagogical exercise involving an examination of political elements of society in an attempt to tease out the unconscious ideologies held by society members with the intention of creating a more enlightened society. Compositionists owe it to their students to attempt to increase their awareness about their lives and their societies, as well as teach them how to improve their writing. The political emphasis of cultural criticism is one of its strongest points because it makes students more aware of the ubiquitous political elements influencing, and, at times, controlling their lives, and it presents students with interesting subject matter to discuss and write about. Cultural critics, by making students more aware of their societies, also hope to create a more enlightened society, one in which positive changes will take place, and they are not afraid to state this in their writings. (Contains 13 references.) (RS)

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Cultural Criticism: Toward a Definition of Professional Praxis

Recently, the members of the Department of English at Wayne State University were faced with a dilemma in their attempts to hire a cultural studies specialist: neither the committee members, nor the other members of the department, could define exactly what a cultural studies specialist does. This inability to define the work of cultural studies led the department to postpone the hiring of such a specialist.

The problem has been a similar one in composition studies, where no one, to my knowledge, has put forth a specific definition of our version of cultural studies which we sometimes refer to as cultural criticism. However, I will argue in this article that the task of defining the work of cultural critics is considerably simpler in composition studies than it is in the English Department as a whole because of the narrower focus of our cultural criticism: our cultural criticism does not have to be all things to all people nor do we attempt to make it so. In this article I will examine cultural studies as English Departments appear to understand it and then define what I see the cultural criticism of composition studies to be.

The discipline known as cultural studies appears to have had its beginnings in England with the work of Raymond Williams, particularly the publication of his *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* in 1958. In his "Introduction to the Morningside Edition," the 1983 edition of *Culture and Society*, Williams claims that it was this book, his later work *The Long Revolution*, along with Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and E. P.

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Thompson's *William Morris* and *The Making of the English Working Class*, which began the new intellectual movement known as cultural studies (xi).

Although Williams appears to have dealt mainly with language and society in founding cultural studies as the English Department understands it, the literature of that discipline certainly does not limit itself to those topics. In fact, the field of cultural studies has become so diverse that giving it a clear definition is nearly impossible, and, for some, because of the limiting effect of a definition, undesirable. According to Stuart Hall, "Cultural studies is not one thing, it has never been one thing" (as quoted in Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg 3). Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg, editors of one of the most complete works on cultural studies, claim that it is critical to the nature of cultural studies that it remain a rather amorphous entity: "Even when cultural studies is identified with a specific national tradition like British cultural studies, it remains a diverse and often contentious enterprise, encompassing different positions and trajectories in specific contexts, addressing many questions, drawing nourishment from multiple roots, and shaping itself within different institutions and locations" (3). They argue that the discipline of cultural studies will change over time as it meets "with new disciplines and national contexts." The ability to change and adapt is important, they claim, because cultural studies needs to "remain open to unexpected, unimagined, even uninvited possibilities" (3).

Although Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg attempt to make cultural studies appear to be as indefinable, and thus versatile, a discipline as

possible, they, nonetheless, narrow the parameters of what they see cultural studies to be:

One may begin by saying that cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture. . . . It is typically interpretive and evaluative in its methodologies, but unlike traditional humanism it rejects the exclusive equation of culture with high culture and argues that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures. Cultural studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices. (4)

Such a seemingly broad definition makes it likely that the only necessity for something to come under the scrutiny of a cultural critic is that it be a cultural element, and not necessarily a cultural element of obvious importance or prominence.

As amorphous as the scholars working within the discipline attempt to make it, it is never entirely without form. There is a certain political edge to cultural studies that always gives it shape: cultural critics examine society with a particular intent, the intent to illuminate elements that they feel need to be exposed, elements which are often

conservative in nature. Politics necessarily plays a role in cultural studies, although, as Stuart Hall puts it "not that there's one politics already inscribed in it" (278). However, cultural studies, by its very nature, is a discipline that is aimed at making a difference in society, a political difference. According to Hall, "it is a serious enterprise, or project and that is inscribed in what is sometimes called the 'political' aspect of cultural studies." Hall argues that "there is something *at stake* in cultural studies, in a way that I think, and hope, is not exactly true of many other very important intellectual and critical practices" (278).

Indeed, something is at stake in cultural studies and that something is political in nature. It cannot help being so. However, where literature specialists in cultural studies find that "all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures," I believe that compositionists who engage in cultural criticism are much more interested in Hall's overtly political aspect of cultural studies. Compositionists James Berlin and Michael Vivion claim, like Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, that any definition of cultural studies is difficult to determine, and that a useful definition would have to "indicate the open-ended nature" of the discipline known as cultural studies (vii-viii). They define cultural studies as a discipline that "deals with the production, distribution, and reception of signifying practices within the myriad historical formations that are shaping subjectivities." These practices, they argue, are "always negotiated in power and politics, and power and politics are always negotiated in

discursive practices" (Berlin and Vivion ix). Berlin and Vivion, like a number of other compositionists, consider cultural studies to be overtly political, their interest centering mainly on the discursive practices of societies.

Although Berlin and Vivion continue to use the term "cultural studies" in their recent publication, for the remainder of this study I will be referring to the cultural studies of the compositionists as "cultural criticism" to differentiate it from the "cultural studies" of literature specialists. I feel that I can use that term to describe the cultural studies of compositionists because it appears to be a much more overtly critical enterprise, one that critics use to engage in a more overt critique of culture. Where cultural studies often appears to elaborate on hidden elements of society, cultural criticism often openly criticizes mainly political elements with the express purpose of changing society. Another difference between cultural criticism and cultural studies is that there is a definite pedagogical bent to cultural criticism that is often lacking in cultural studies. Cultural criticism is something that is designed for the classroom, for the most part, something to be engaged in by teachers and students together. While a concise definition of cultural studies is difficult to arrive at, such a definition is more apparent for cultural criticism. After examining the works on cultural criticism of Patricia Bizzell, Dale Bauer, Bruce Herzberg, James Berlin, and Paulo Freire, I would like to propose that cultural criticism be defined as *a pedagogical exercise involving an examination of political elements of society in an*

attempt to tease out the unconscious ideologies held by society members with the intention of creating a more enlightened society.

My proposed definition is both broader and narrower than Berlin and Vivion's. They limit their's to the signifying practices of society, while my definition covers all political elements, including signifying practices. My definition is narrower because I find that cultural criticism is pedagogical in nature, and, in particular, it deals with the discovery of unconscious ideologies in students. Further, I believe, and I will argue below, that the value and strengths of cultural criticism are to be found in the elements making up its definition.

The four key elements in my proposed definition are: 1) cultural criticism is a pedagogical exercise; 2) cultural criticism attempts to tease out unconscious ideologies; 3) cultural criticism deals mainly with political topics; and, 4) cultural criticism is engaged in with the intention of creating a more enlightened society. Of the cultural critics mentioned above, I have found that Patricia Bizzell, in particular, deals concisely with these three elements in her short essay "'Cultural Criticism': A Social Approach to Studying Writing." She writes: "I think the question of how to do cultural criticism is crucial for our field because I hope it will help us to understand specifically what ideologies are contesting in the writing classroom and what we can do to foster social justice through our activities there" (226).

As a cultural critic, her main focus is on the use of cultural criticism in the composition classroom. Although Bizzell gives other areas of

application for cultural studies, such as in the examination of academic and scholarly texts, her primary concentration appears to be on cultural criticism in the writing classroom: "I most need to see how one could teach it, how one could bring cultural criticism into the writing classroom" (230). She is specifically interested in student writing and its culturally specific nature:

First, the writing a student produces can be interpreted as a culturally situated effort at meaning-making rather than as a tissue of errors. Student writing reproduces conventions that we are perhaps more accustomed to analyze in works of literary art, and student writing thus also carries ideological assumptions that, again, we are more accustomed to taking seriously in "serious" literature. (226)

The focus of composition studies centers on teaching; therefore, the objective of cultural criticism is consistent with that of composition--the education of students. I believe we owe it to our students to attempt to increase their awareness about their lives and their societies, as well as teach them how to improve their writing. Naturally, because I am discussing composition courses, student writing will take center stage in a cultural criticism pedagogy; although class discussion will be critical, the focus will be on class discussion for the purpose of gleaning ideas that will lead to the writing of essays. A pedagogy that teases out students' unconscious ideologies will give them not only a great deal to learn and discuss in class, but also many interesting topics about which to

write. Cultural criticism, by tapping into their political unconscious, appears to make students think, which is an important element of writing. Furthermore, by piquing their interest, it appears to make them want to write as well.

And it is also apparent that Bizzell is interested in teasing out the unconscious ideologies that the people of a certain society may have. She finds this to be one of the central focusses of cultural criticism:

Cultural criticism foregrounds ideologies that may be not only taken for granted but also actively suppressed from the consciousness of people acting on them; cultural criticism calls attention to the ways that important value systems can be erased or suppressed, especially the political motives that may lead one social group to try to impose such concealment upon another. (225)

In addition to helping them improve their writing, we do our students a great service by teasing out ideologies contained in their political unconscious because students often hold, unexamined, the attitudes, values, and beliefs of their cultures. I've found in class discussions that student attitudes and beliefs on any number of topics are fully predictable, mirroring the attitudes and beliefs of the dominant culture. This, of course, is to be expected. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, for instance, see members of a society as not only the creators of knowledge, but also as beings who are created by a society's knowledge:

Again, the same body of knowledge is transmitted to the

next generation. It is learned as objective truth in the course of socialization and thus internalized as subjective reality. This reality in turn has power to shape the individual. (67)

Unfortunately, the typical college education generally works to expand the student's knowledge without giving him or her insight into the reified nature of his or her beliefs, attitudes, and values. While it is true that many of these attitudes, values, and beliefs are positive, some may not be, and most are likely to be unconsciously held. Students gain awareness by having it demonstrated to them that many of their attitudes are actually society's attitudes, and that many of their beliefs do not originate within themselves, but from the society in which they live. They will profit from being taught, as Freire proposes, that "culture is all human creation" (403). I believe that it is important that we cultural critics work with the students to increase their awareness of their own and society's attitudes, values, and beliefs so that they can make conscious choices as to which ones they wish to keep and which they might want to modify. Furthermore, we need to make them aware of the institutions working to control their behavior so that they can come to understand the outside forces, in particular those that are political, that influence their lives.

And, indeed, politics is as viable a topic as any other in the composition classroom--hopefully, we have moved past the point in composition studies where the old axiom "never discuss politics or

religion" holds sway. Bizzell claims that politics should be a part of the cultural criticism classroom, particularly the study of "the political motives that may lead one social group to try to impose such concealment [of important value systems] upon another"(225).

However, some compositionists complain that composition instructors are not trained to discuss such topics, but, then, who is? If one has to have a Ph.D. in political science to discuss politics in this society, then that would give very few people the right, including all of our legislators and high school teachers, and all of our graduate assistants, including those majoring in political science. Further, to argue against discussing politics is to preach that we ignore the force that politics has in our cultures, in our everyday lives, and in our students' lives. One possible reason so few students vote is because they are unaware of the omnipresence and power of politics in their lives. (I was shocked by one freshman composition class of mine in which all students but one said they were not going to vote in the 1988 Presidential Election.) The problem is not that we discuss politics too much in this society, including the universities, but that we discuss it too little because the subject makes many people, including some compositionists, uncomfortable. Cultural critics attempt to respond to this deficiency, to fill in this critical empty space. Therefore, I would argue that the political emphasis of cultural criticism is one of its strongest points because it makes students more aware of the ubiquitous political elements influencing, and, at times, controlling their lives, and it

presents students with interesting subject matter about which to discuss and write.

Bizzell is very clear in her belief that a central goal of cultural criticism should be the creation of a more just society. Not only that, but she calls others to become cultural critics because she appears to believe that, by its very nature, cultural criticism will lead to a more just society:

I think it is important for academics to become cultural critics, or critical intellectuals as the practitioners are sometimes called, because I hope that the activity of cultural criticism will foster social justice by making people aware of politically motivated ideological concealments. Underlying this hope are two assumptions, that the present social order is unjust, and that becoming aware of how injustice is protected and promulgated ideologically will enable people better to resist and change it. (225)

In contrast, George Will complained about the "ameliorative dimension" of the University of Texas-Austin's cultural criticism pedagogy in his article "Thought Police Thrive on Campus." I find such a complaint to be, at best, uninformed. I would argue that all college education should have an ameliorative effect on society--why are we attempting to impart greater knowledge to our students in all of our courses, in every discipline, if not to improve society? Do we not believe that greater education leads to a more informed citizenry and, thus,

hopefully, a more enlightened society? Do we not educate every student with the hope that he or she will help to make society a better, fairer place for all to enjoy? The university exists to educate people in order to improve society, including the balancing out of some social inequities, thus the scholarships aimed only at minorities. We cultural critics, by making our students more aware about their societies, also hope to create a more enlightened society, one in which positive changes will take place, and we are not afraid to state so in our writings. Such pedagogies are, I believe, very valuable--to students and society.

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